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ABSTRACT

In 1981, the conservative Coalition for Better Television (CBTV) threatened an economic boycott against advertisers who marketed their wares on programs that the coalition felt had excessive sex and violence. Because television networks are dependent on advertising, the coalition believed economic pressure on advertisers would force a corresponding pressure by the advertisers on the networks to alter their programing. Networks would naturally succumb to the pressure since they could ill-afford to lose top advertisers. The boycott threat was criticized for three reasons: (1) it amounted to censorship, since advertisement involves speech; (2) it affected innocent bystanders, such as employees of the products advertised; and (3) it precluded the right of television audiences to view what they choose. Although the threatened boycott never materialized, there is evidence that sponsors and networks were very aware of the coalition, and had voluntarily made efforts to reduce objectionable programing, making the boycott unnecessary. Some observers saw the coalition's influence in later programing, although networks would not admit the coalition had forced a change in their 1981 fall schedule. Shortly thereafter, the coalition threatened a second boycott against the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and its subsidiaries, one of which was the NBC network. Although this boycott did materialize, it did not enjoy the support of the Moral Majority and other conservative groups and had little effect. (HTH)

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PRESSURES ON TV PROGRAMS: COALITION FOR BETTER TELEVISION'S CASE

By John M. Shipman Jr.*

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 504

The Coalition for Better Television used the economic boycott and the threat of the boycott against the networks in an effort to change programming. In the following report, the author contends that while the tactic might have had some success with advertisers, it was disregarded by viewers and had little effect on ratings.

"The producers don't really give a damn about Wildmon or this Moral Majority, but once it begins to affect their pocketbooks — well, if it's clean and sells, then that's what they will deliver. — A television advertising buyer."¹

In the early 1840s, Mordecai M. Nosh, publisher of the New York *Courier and Journal*, called upon the citizens of New York City to impose a boycott against James Gordon Bennett's New York *Herald*. Bennett's sensational reporting tactics — and, no doubt, his success — brought the wrath of both his competitors and his detractors.²

The boycott spread from New York to Baltimore via Boston, Philadelphia and Albany, N.Y. Bennett was called a "venomous reptile," a "turkey buzzard," and an "unprincipled adventurer," among other things. The boycott cost the *Herald* nearly one third of its circulation and Bennett eventually promised more constraint in his reporting. The boycott lasted only a few months, but, according to noted journalism historian Frank Luther Mott, it caused the tone of the *Herald* to improve.³

In 1981, some 140 years after the boycott of the *Herald*, the Coalition for Better Television (CBTV) tried a reverse tactic to achieve the same result. Instead of threatening directly the medium that it opposed, the CBTV, headed by the Rev. Donald Wildmon, a methodist from Tupelo, Miss., threatened an economic boycott against advertisers. The advertisers targeted were ones who marketed their wares on programs that the coalition said had excessive sex and violence.

The threatened boycott tactics were compared to Nazi party plays in pre-World War II Germany, McCarthyism in post-World War II United States and tactics of the 1919 Red Scare period in the United States.⁴

The boycott threat also brought howls of protest from some advertisers and the networks. Sympathizers of the boycott

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strategy said it was not censorship but "the most common strategy known to capitalism."⁵ Although the threatened boycott never became reality, Wildmon did organize a boycott a year later against RCA and its subsidiaries, one of which is NBC. The 1982 boycott was not supported by the powerful Moral Majority, a religious organization, although the threatened 1981 boycott enjoyed the backing of that conservative interest group.

According to a secretary at the National Federation of Decency's headquarters in Tupelo, the coalition no longer exists.⁶ The NFD, which Wildmon founded in 1976, still monitors television shows with the aid of organizations throughout the United States, but monitoring is no longer the NFD's major effort.⁷

Nevertheless, the coalition did not suffer from a lack of publicity in its heyday. The national press generated much free publicity, and obviously the boycott drew a lot of attention from sponsors of network television shows and from the networks themselves.

But how effective was the 1981 boycott threat and the actual 1982 boycott? This paper will examine the threat and the boycott by looking at the viewpoints of those who favored and those who opposed these tactics. Perspectives on the effectiveness of the boycott will be examined. The boycott was important because it was thought to be the first national attempt to use economic coercion against a television network to reduce the sex and violence content of its programs.⁸

BOYCOTT SOURCES

The boycott against Bennett's *Herald* and Wildmon's threatened and actual boycotts have one thing in common. All were aimed at sources of revenue. In Bennett's day, subscriptions were still a major source of revenue for the newspapers, and pressure could be brought to bear on publishers by reducing the number of subscribers. Of course, that is still true today in the sense that advertising rates are based on circulation.

In the case of the networks, advertisers are critically im-

portant because the enormous sums of money they spend to promote their products on television support the television industry. Syndicated columnist Milton Moskowitz recently wrote that 30 seconds of advertising on the highly rated "60 Minutes" sells for \$190,000, which is the highest price for any regularly appearing show.⁹

Because Networks are dependent on advertisers, Wildmon and the coalition believed economic pressure on advertisers would force a corresponding pressure by the advertisers on the networks to alter their programming. Networks would naturally succumb to the pressure since they could ill-afford to lose top advertisers.

Boycotts can have a direct and noticeable effect on the press's content, as witnessed by the boycott against Bennett's *Herald*. Further evidence comes from studying history. For example, patriotic and business organizations, libraries and clubs boycotted William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* following President William McKinley's assassination. Hearst's paper had bitterly opposed McKinley, and some people said his editorials inflamed the assassin. The pressure eventually pushed Hearst to change the name of his paper to *The American*. Mott writes that the outrage at Hearst diminished yellow journalism in many other newspapers. Thus, the boycott might be said to have affected content for many newspapers of the day.

Whether the boycott led by Wildmon had any such effect is arguable. Although many major advertisers withdrew from some targeted prime-time shows, currently the highest rated shows are also rated high in sex and violence content. For example, recent ratings show that "Dallas," "Dynasty" and "The A-Team" are among the top-rated shows. All three have been criticized for having excessive sex or violence.

Wildmon said he founded the NFD in 1976 because network television shows were not suitable for children viewing.¹¹ Wildmon was a Methodist minister in Southaven, Miss. He resigned his ministry and moved to Tupelo to start the NFD.¹²

In 1977, Wildmon organized a "Turn Television Off Week" protest, and the following year the NFD picketed ABC headquarters in New York and at 30 affiliates.¹³

In 1980, Wildmon apparently was successful in persuading companies not to advertise on a controversial ABC television movie entitled, "The Women's Room,"¹⁴ and 10 of 14 minutes of spot advertising were withdrawn prior to the air date. ABC executive Brandon Stoddard said the network lost a lot of money on the show despite the high ratings.¹⁵

Shortly after its founding, the NFD began monitoring television to determine the amount of sex and violence in the programs. The monitoring is still being done today with the aid of church groups, civic groups and other conservative organizations, said Forrest Ann Daniels, Wildmon's secretary in Tupelo.¹⁶ The California-based American Coalition for Traditional Values is one of the organizations allied with the NFD's monitoring effort.¹⁷

Wildmon helped form CBTv because of fears that the NFD was not influencing prime-time programming.¹⁸ He said the coalition comprised 200 groups.¹⁹ A review of the coalition's board of directors shows that prominent conservative groups were represented, including the Moral Majority, led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, and the Eagle Forum, headed by Phyllis Schlafly, salient foe of the Equal Rights Amendment.²⁰

The addition of the Moral Majority lent credibility and clout to the coalition. Falwell's organization is one of the largest and most influential of the conservative religious groups, and he pledged to raise \$2 million for the coalition. Moreover, Falwell threatened five-million-piece direct mailing campaign

if the networks did not clean up programming.²¹

In February of 1981, Wildmon announced that the CBTv would monitor television programs during March, April and May, and select the advertisers who sponsored the most offensive shows. Then, he said, the coalition would ask for a one-year voluntary boycott on their products.²²

The boycott threat drew quick reaction from the networks and advertisers.

Peter Allport, president of the Association of National Advertisers, advocated ignoring boycott suggestions because they constituted a threat to the viewers' freedom of choice.²³

CRITICISM OF BOYCOTT TACTICS

Essentially, the boycott threat was criticized for three reasons:

- ✓ 1) It is censorship; critics said this boycott, unlike other economic boycotts aimed at lettuce producers or makers of powdered infant formula, involved speech.²⁴
- ✓ 2) The boycott causes innocent bystanders to suffer. People who work at the companies may lose their jobs if a boycott is successful. Other consumers may not be able to purchase the products they want. A boycott can also cause inferior products to be bought by the public or urged on the public.
- ✓ 3) People should be allowed freedom of choice in what they watch. The argument against the boycott threat on this count was that it was aimed at inflicting one group's opinions on others, even though the others may be the majority.

There was little question about the legality of the boycott. The U.S. Supreme Court previously ruled in favor of the National Organization of Women's boycott of corporations that did business in Florida after that state refused to ratify the ERA.²⁵ Also, the Supreme Court in 1980 ruled that an advertising boycott did not violate anti-trust laws.²⁶ A more recent decision by the California Supreme Court said that the First Amendment protects the right of citizen groups to urge boycotts of newspaper advertisers.²⁷

In the 1980 case, Las Vegas casinos owned by the late Howard Hughes established an advertising boycott of the *Las Vegas Sun*. The Supreme Court ruled that the boycott was not a violation of the Sherman Act.²⁸ In the Californian case, the environmental planning and information council urged a boycott of a newspaper. The newspaper claimed an obstruction of the business relationship between the newspaper and its advertisers. The court ruled that the relationship did not override constitutional freedoms.²⁹

Allegations of censorship drew the most fire. Peggy Charren, leader of Action for Children's Television, another reform group, attacked the coalition's plans as a frightening form of censorship with "political overtones that are dangerous."³⁰ Charren started gathering signatures for a petition to present to the networks. The petition protested the boycott as a limit on program options and threat to the marketplace of ideas.³¹

Nonetheless, defenders of the boycott, such as columnist George Will, pooh-poohed the suggestion that it constituted censorship. Will termed the networks' response as "hysterical" and compared the coalition boycott to one led by Martin Luther King against the Montgomery, Ala., public bus system during the early days of the civil rights movement.³²

The CBTv said that the boycott was not censorship because censorship was an official act of government, not action by the private sector. Wildmon said the clearest expression of the First Amendment is a person's right to spend his money as he pleases.³³ When the American Civil Liberties Union attacked

the boycott, the coalition responded by advocating its arguments through newspaper advertisements.

Jan R. Var Meter, a senior vice president of Hill and Knowlton's public issues and public policy group, warned against attacking the boycott as censorship. Van Meter argued that liberal groups also had used boycott tactics.³⁴ Timothy Noah wrote in the *New Republic* that the liberals also favor censorship, but they attempt to achieve it through the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission. Nevertheless, Noah said that feminists are censors because they boycott stores that sell "pornography."³⁵ There may be a measure of irony in that the conservative NFD recently boycotted the Southland Corporation, owner of 7-Eleven stores. The NFD picketed the stores for selling publications it deemed pornographic.

Doubtlessly the networks' censorship claims had trouble gaining public sympathy. Van Meter argues that the networks had difficulty in mounting a counter-campaign against the coalition for three reasons:

- ✓ 1) The coalition said it was pro-family and against excessive sex and violence. For the networks to argue against the coalition's aims would appear to be arguing against morality.
- ✓ 2) The networks underrated the coalition.
- ✓ 3) Most liberal organizations did not strongly defend television programming, essentially because liberals and intellectuals also often view television as destructive. In essence, CBTv and many intellectuals and liberals are opposed to television programming, but for different reasons.³⁶ This being the case, more liberal organizations could not really put their hearts into a fight in defense of television programming.

GOVERNMENT STAYS OUT

The government refused to enter the fray. On ABC's "Nightline," FCC Chairman Mark Fowler said the FCC would not determine taste in programming. But, he said, the Reagan administration supported the boycott as "consistent with the democratic process."³⁷

Generally, advertisers remained reticent on questions of censorship with the exception of James L. Ferguson, chairman of General Foods. Ferguson said that the company strongly opposed boycott efforts of "self-appointed censors" to control television programming.³⁸ In 1979 General Foods spent more than \$296 million on television advertising, second only to Procter & Gamble.

Opponents of censorship have expressed the same arguments for years. In 1927, Heywood Broun wrote in *Anthony Comstock* that censors become crusaders. "He comes in time to find it in stones and running brooks," Broun said. "His eagerness for the chase distorts his judgment."³⁹ Broun also said that to forbid was simply to underline. When something was suppressed, it simply makes people want it all the more.⁴⁰

The other argument against the boycott, that it harmed innocent workers, was questioned by Michael Jameson, legislative researcher for the American Coalition for Traditional Values. Jameson said any effect on workers had to be weighed against the effects of televised sex and violence on viewers. "It's (the boycott) the only voice we really have," he said. "You know, the Boston Tea Party was a pretty effective boycott."⁴¹

The effects of televised sex and violence on people are still widely debated. Research studies have concentrated on violence and indicate that the programming may affect viewers under some circumstances. At best, research suggests that

some programs, under some circumstances, might have some effect on some people. Whether the effect is positive or negative might depend on the person, the show and the circumstances. So far researchers still cannot definitively predict the effects on individuals.

Because of the uncertainty of ill effects, a major criticism of the boycott was that the coalition was trying to impose its personal tastes on the public.

A Harris Poll showed that many Americans thought evangelical preachers should refrain from pressuring the networks to remove shows the preachers found immoral.⁴² Apparently people preferred to decide themselves what constituted wanton sex and violence.

Viewpoints of what is vulgar programming also vary among individuals and cultures. For example, frontal nudity is acceptable in some countries while certain words are not acceptable.⁴³ One writer said most people disagreed with the idea of a boycott because it implied people have a dark side to be protected against. People preferred to make their own decisions on morality.⁴⁴

Throughout the early debate about the morality of a boycott, the advertisers stayed quiet. Nevertheless, Peter Allport, president of the Association of National Advertisers, said, "holding a variety of advertisers responsible for the programming of a network simply because they have some corporate relationship makes no sense whatsoever."⁴⁵

The coalition seemed divided whether a boycott should be undertaken. Falwell and Wildmon made conflicting statements concerning the need for a boycott, and the opposing views might have hurt the organization. Falwell said he doubted program sponsors would "allow a dogfight to occur involving five million Americans."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Wildmon said he was "99.99 percent sure" there would be a boycott.⁴⁷

Some observers saw the disagreement as a power struggle between Falwell and Wildmon. When the threatened boycott failed to materialize, it appeared that Falwell's Moral Majority might have lost interest in pursuing the possibility of a boycott to change programming. Also Falwell's Moral Majority refused to support the actual boycott in 1982. Nevertheless, an NFD official in Tupelo said the coalition's breakup was not tied to Falwell's lack of support.⁴⁸

Indeed, the NFD may be the only ex-coalition member cognizant that the coalition has disintegrated. A secretary at the Moral Majority headquarters in Lynchburg, Va., said the organization's files still listed the coalition. "If they don't exist, we don't know about it," she said.⁴⁹ An American Coalition for Traditional Values' researcher said he thought the coalition still existed.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Mrs. Daniels, Wildmon's secretary, said all Tupelo-based activities were now undertaken by the NFD, not the coalition.⁵¹

In the *New York Times*, Van Meter wrote that there might be other reasons for calling off the boycott. He said that the evangelical alliance might have viewed a boycott as an unwanted distraction in the 1982 political season.⁵² Also, he said that a boycott could sharpen the power struggle he saw between Falwell and Wildmon. Moreover, Van Meter said that a boycott might be ineffective even if called because the coalition was unrehearsed at the technique, and companies might garner support from appeals to antagonists of the boycott.⁵³ Van Meter added that the coalition's members remained uncounted and there was no evidence they would persevere through a long haul.⁵⁴

A Roper poll possibly backed up Van Meter's assertions. The polls showed the majority of the shows on Wildmon's "hit list" received more positive than negative comments. This

finding held true for people with religious fundamentalists although they were more concerned with sex and violence than non-fundamentalists.⁵⁵ Also, CBS said 30 percent of the groups Wildmon claimed as coalition members denied membership in the organization.⁵⁶

Whether Van Meter's reasoning of the boycott's cancellation is correct is debatable. Both Wildmon and Falwell claim the boycott was called off because informal efforts were successful with program sponsors.

RESPONSE

TO

BOYCOTT THREAT

There is evidence indicating that the sponsors and the networks were very aware of the coalition, and that the boycott may not have been necessary. Three events provide the evidence supporting this view:

- ✓ 1) In a June 1981 speech made by Owen B. Butler, chairman of Procter & Gamble Co., the nation's largest advertiser, Butler said before the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences that P&G had withdrawn sponsorship from more than 50 programs not compatible with its image.
- ✓ 2) Also in June, the coalition met in Memphis with representatives from a number of companies. The meeting reportedly discussed a possible compromise to avert a boycott.⁵⁷
- ✓ 3) In May, the topic, "The proliferation of Pressure Groups in Prime Time," was discussed at a seminar in Ojai, Calif., an oblique reference to the coalition and the threatened boycott. A writer covering the meeting said there were strong indications that at least some TV advertisers are marching to the drum beat of the religious right.⁵⁸

The Ojai meeting was sponsored by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and by the Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors. Representatives from the major advertisers also attended. The advertisers said they had not bowed to coalition pressure, but Alfred Schneider, ABC vice president for broadcast standards, said the advertisers were moving away from supporting certain programs.⁵⁹

Advertisers expressed concern over an "escalation of sex" in prime-time programming. They also said they would not abandon programs they thought were good, but that they had a problem with "gratuitous sex and violence." Advertisers at the meeting included the Gillette Co., Bristol-Meyer Co., General Foods Corp. and Procter & Gamble.⁶⁰

P&G vice president for advertising, Robert Goldstien, set the stage for Butler's upcoming speech when he said, "There are an awful lot of Americans who feel that even if they don't agree totally with Donald Wildmon, he has a point."⁶¹

Butler's speech sent shock waves through the broadcasting industry. Butler told the academy that his company would not lend its name to programs that had excessive sex or violence. He said that he shared the Moral Majority and the coalition's concerns about television programming, and his company would not sponsor programs with excessive sex and violence.⁶²

Nevertheless, the coalition did not claim credit for Butler's speech, and the Moral Majority vice president of operations, Rod Godwin, said P&G's advertising pullout when the coalition appeared was simply coincidence.⁶³

Butler's speech carried clout. P&G paid \$486.3 million in television advertising in 1980,⁶⁴ and the networks did not want to lose their largest sponsor. Barry Smyth, a P&G spokesman, said the company had "a healthy exchange" with coalition officials but denied the meeting caused the ads to be withdrawn.⁶⁵

Still Butler's speech raised eyebrows. Some observers said

Butler might have been trying to protect P&G's \$200 million investment in daytime soap operas. Advertising Age questioned P&G's motives, "... the feeling persists that the No.1 advertiser was simply looking out for No.1."⁶⁶

The editorial also hit another common criticism of Butler's speech — that he gave credibility to the coalition.

Wildmon was questioned why the coalition did not monitor daytime soap operas. His response was that the coalition did not have the resources to boycott objectionable daytime soap operas.⁶⁷ P&G officials defended the speech as consistent with company policy. One official said P&G had always been a conservative sponsor, and that the speech was a reaffirmation of a policy "that goes back to the days of radio."⁶⁸

Nevertheless, an anonymous broadcast executive said in Advertising Age that P&G had been very upset at the possibility of being targeted by the coalition. The executive said P&G and the coalition continuously discussed how the monitoring was rating the company.⁶⁹

Grant Tinker, then president of MTM Productions, agreed with Butler's speech, calling it "first rate." He said if the networks "cleaned up our own act, there'd be nobody out there trying to clean it up for us."⁷⁰ Not everyone was as enamored by Butler's speech as Tinker.

In an article in Channels, Walter Karp said Butler's speech was designed to give credibility to Wildmon and the coalition as part of a far-reaching scheme by major corporations to increase the Reagan Administration's power.⁷¹ Karp went on to say:

"The big corporations understand perfectly well that the Coalition for Better Television consists mainly of right wing groups who care more about Reagan's success than they do about television smut. They know, too, that a "constructive contribution to society" is a useful mask for promoting the Reaganite creed."⁷²

Karp believed that the companies were ultimately looking for the networks to give a more constructive portrayal of business during prime time. He said P&G had no other reason to promote Wildmon since in 1980 Wildmon had already termed P&G the "top sponsor of sex and profanity."⁷³

The meetings in Memphis between the coalition and major companies drew the comment that Butler's speech did, primarily because neither group would discuss the meetings. Nevertheless, the line-up of companies at the meeting indicated how powerful the coalition was perceived.

Advertising Age reported that Smith Kline, Werner-Lambert and Miles Laboratories confirmed they had gone to the Memphis meeting. Officials of Sterling Drugs said the company received word that a "personal appearance was in order, but declined to confirm whether the company attended. Advertising Age reported widespread rumors that Beecham Products and Esmark met with CBTV officials.⁷⁴ Few of the executives would talk about the meetings, although Jeremy Haymsfeld, a SmithKline spokesman, said his company had met with the coalition. He also said that SmithKline President Henry Wendt had expressed concern to network heads about gratuitous television sex and violence.⁷⁵

Besides the meetings in Memphis, the Butler speech, and the Ojai meeting, there were other indications that the coalition was being heard.

PROGRAMMING CHANGE

Some observers saw the coalition's influence in the program-

ming. Although networks would not admit the coalition had forced a change in their 1981 fall schedule, the Boston Globe said the programming suggested Wildmon's message had been heard.⁷⁶

Discreetly not mentioning the coalition, Frederick A. Pierce, vice president of ABC, said of the fall schedule:

"Our new schedule reflects something important that is happening in the country right now.. There's an evolving mood based on a renewal of traditional values — home and family, courage and honesty, respect for authority and team work."⁷⁷

An advertising executive said of one ABC's new fall shows:

"Just take a look at a publicity photo for ABC's 'It's a Living Thing' and compare it to one from last year. Then the girls were standing around in their brief costumes with everything hanging out. Now they're dressed in high-necked French maid outfits with little if anything showing."⁷⁸

The advertisers left little doubt that sponsorship of programs was influenced by the CBTv. Al Hagen, a Toyota marketing executive, said the company, with CBTv in mind, reviewed the content of all the programs and paid special attention to the time slots that the shows aired.⁷⁹ Other advertisers said their companies had been concerned about the sex and violence in programming even before the boycott threat. Revlon Executive Vice President Sanford Bushsbaum said clean programming was back in style.⁸⁰ Advertisers such as Pepsico and International Telephone and Telegraph said they were concerned about the programs they sponsored.⁸¹

The apparent shift to "clean" programming had another effect, that of increasing the pricing for such shows. Advertising agency executives and spokesmen said that the group pressure had increased awareness of program content.⁸²

When the advertisers expressed concern, networks were likely to respond. As one agency client said, "The bottom line is that the networks have to make the bucks. With the pressures building on the advertisers, they are going to look for programs with strong moral values and tone down anything considered too offensive."⁸³ By controlling the pricing of television shows, one writer said, the coalition was controlling television.⁸⁴

THE 1982 BOYCOTT

Nevertheless, CBTv's failure to mount a boycott when it first threatened, and the Moral Majority's failure to support the actual boycott of RCA, seemed to take the sting out of the coalition.

Almost as soon Wildmon's 1981 threatened boycott failed to materialize, he began threatening a boycott again. When the boycott materialized in 1982, the Moral Majority made it clear that it would not go along. Earlier in the year, Wildmon was claiming that the CBTv represented more than 1,300 organizations including the Moral Majority that did not support the boycott. Phyllis Schlafly was also uncertain whether the Eagle Forum would participate.⁸⁵

Wildmon claimed no concern about the absence of the Moral Majority, but it soon became apparent that the advertisers were not nearly as concerned about Wildmon. Rick Buscaglio, a senior vice president of McCann-Erickson, an advertising agency, said there was not much concern that the boycott would be successful.⁸⁶ Other agencies said there was some concern but companies were not intimidated.⁸⁷

Advertising Age said that possibly the advertiser's nervousness of CBTv was alleviated as they became familiar with their antagonist. "Once advertisers gained knowledge of who the CBTv was, they are less fearful of them. There had been a fear of the unknown."⁸⁸

A marketing manager, who refused to be identified, said CBTv lost influence because of the advent of similar groups, which caused the various groups to collapse under their own weight.

Nonetheless, Wildmon did announce a boycott of RCA and its subsidiaries on March 4, 1982. Wildmon presented a list of 11 demands. He said the NBC was singled out because its programs were worse than those of ABC and CBS.⁸⁹

It was questionable whether CBTv could succeed against RCA. The Rev. Everett Parker, the director of the influential Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ, said it was "ridiculous that a small religious group can try to put a company like RCA out of business." Parker said Wildmon spoke for "sincere and good people" but that he did not represent the mainstream of American Christians.⁹⁰

The Christian Century accentuated what Parker and some Christian magazines were saying. In a sarcastic editorial the magazine asked:

"Now if Mr. Wildmon succeeds, and RCA does all the things he insists they must, what do we do next, fellow Christians? ... If we can bring RCA, Hertz and NBC to their collective knees (there are still Reynolds Tobacco Company, Eastern Airlines (for rude service), the Hyatt hotel chain (for high prices) and every city transit service. Who knows? Today it's America's top corporate giants: tomorrow, the world. Good luck, Mr. Wildmon."⁹¹

America, published by the Jesuits of America and Canada, said that Wildmon's ends were legitimate but not his means, which could threaten the Bill of Rights. The magazine said the principle of editorial freedom was important to maintain and that the coalition would be tempted to act against broadcasters in marginal cases if successful against television programming.

But not all Christian magazines were dubious about the boycott. The evangelical Christianity Today was squarely behind CBTv's campaign, calling it "common sense for common decency." The magazine said the boycott was necessary for the networks to take CBTv seriously.⁹²

The first editorial endorsement of the boycott came from Interchange, an Episcopal newspaper in southern Ohio with a circulation of 30,000.⁹⁴ Christianity Today said a survey of 57 "prominent Christians" showed 80 percent supporting the boycott.⁹⁵ The magazine also reported that although the Moral Majority was "conspicuously absent" some of its state directors were upset with Falwell's decision. The magazine said that some state chapters of the Moral Majority eventually endorsed the boycott.⁹⁶

Prior to the boycott Wildmon said that the CBTv must succeed or "we're out of business."⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the support was not forthcoming. By noon of the boycott's first day, NBC said it had only received 10 telephone calls and one mailgram — all in support of the network.⁹⁸

But after a month, Wildmon claimed that the boycott was more successful than he had expected, but he declined to show how he had arrived at that conclusion. Wildmon had claimed that loss of revenue, not television ratings, would be the key indicator of success.⁹⁹ There was no apparent loss for RCA, NBC or any of the other subsidiaries, which included Hertz, CIT Fi-

nancial Corporation, Cornet Carpets. When Wildmon announced the boycott, he asked consumers to boycott Gibson Greeting Cards. Apparently he did know that RCA had previously sold that company.

While Wildmon was claiming the boycott was a success, others were less certain. Syndicated columnist Gary Deeb said the boycott failed during the first four weeks, pointing out that more than one half of the NBC prime time programs had increased their Nielson audience ratings during the boycott.¹⁰⁰ Howard Rosenberg, a Los Angeles Times columnist who comments on television, said the boycott had no noticeable effect, but Wildmon might have "more clout than NBC and other networks like to admit" because of his ability to make "advertisers squirm."¹⁰¹ Rosenberg used as an example Wildmon's letter to a number of sponsors of a television movie, "Sister, Sister." Wildmon called the drama, written by Maya Angelou, "anti-Christian" and asked sponsors to pull their ads. Wildmon's letter prompted some advertisers to consider removing their ads while others asked to screen the movie before making a decision.¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

It is hard to say that Wildmon and the CBTV had any long-term effect on television programming. Many of the top-rated shows today still are considered to have a large amount of sexual or violent content. And a look at the earnings of RCA and NBC, which were primary targets of CBTV's boycott, do not show a revenue loss. In fact, 1982 was a year of record earnings for RCA.

Still, there is little doubt that Wildmon and the CBTV did have some effect on advertisers. The organization showed that just a boycott threat can make advertisers and producers nervous.

It seems evident that the Moral Majority's hesitancy to

participate in the boycott against RCA and its NBC subsidiary hurt the boycott's chances for success and reduced the networks and sponsors' fears. CBTV's demise after the boycott supports this conclusion.

The threatened boycott perhaps had more effect on programming than did the actual boycott, possibly because of the solid conservative front that was presented. At any rate, there is no evidence that the networks won a victory for nothing seems to have been settled.

From studying the period of the threatened boycott and the actual boycott, two things appear clear:

—The public, for the most part, will not support an economic boycott of sponsors of television shows, and it will not stop watching programs just because others consider them offensive.

—Advertisers are very aware of the activities of pressure groups and are susceptible to being influenced by those groups. Given the economic structure of broadcasting, this could cause a change in programming unless the networks are willing to stand firm on principles. The economic force of cable television might also be forcing the networks to produce more shows with sex and violence. If cable begins having such programming and it is successful, the networks will surely respond with similar programming.

There seems little doubt that the networks are vulnerable to economic boycott. Perhaps Hodding Carter Jr. posed the real question, which has yet to be answered, when he wrote of the CBTV boycott threat:

"If the principle at stake is really free expression in an open society then the networks must stand fast, regardless of the economic consequences. However, if the principle is the right to make big bucks for shock shows, then the networks will cave in. The boycott organizers think that what really moves the network corporations is money, not principle."¹⁰³

FOOTNOTES

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